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Reagan Plans to Seek New Military Aid to Contras

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 13 — The Reagan Administration plans to proceed with a request for renewed military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, despite lukewarm support in Congress and adamant opposition from leaders of some other Governments in the region, senior officials said today.

The White House "wants to make the members vote in the great white light of public attention on this issue," a senior official said, echoing the Administration's words just before its last request for aid to the rebels, last year.

This time the Administration will contend that the rebels cannot survive as a fighting force without renewed military aid, officials said.

Recent reports from the region support that view, officials said. Since the beginning of February, the rebels have been "exfiltrating from Nicaragua back into Honduras in large numbers" so that a week ago only 2,000 or 3,000 guerrillas remained inside Nicaragua, a senior official who reads intelligence reports from the region said.

Numbers Fall 'A Lot More'

In the last few days, he said, the numbers "have gone down a lot more."

On Monday Secretary of State George P. Shultz rejected an entreaty from eight Latin foreign ministers who

urged the United States to resume negotiations with the Sandinistas.

According to American and foreign officials familiar with the discussion, the Peruvian Foreign Minister, Allan Wagner Tizón, rebuked Mr. Shultz, telling him the United States was to blame for the Sandinistas' ever increasing alliance with the Soviet Union and Cuba.

The Administration had planned to present its proposal for at least \$100 million in renewed aid to the rebels, including some military aid, as early as next week. But it has decided to wait because the congressional agenda is full, an Administration official said.

A new date has not been selected, officials said, but the request will be made before the Congress's Easter recess in mid-March.

This week two House Republican leaders publicly urged President Reagan to proceed with the request for renewed military aid.

In a joint letter to Mr. Reagan, Robert H. Michel of Illinois, the House minority leader, and Dick Cheney of Wyoming, the chairman of the Republican Policy Committee, said: "The most dedicated freedom fighters in the world cannot fight Soviet-made MI-24 helicopters with 'humanitarian' supplies of boots and bandages. The contras need a substantial amount of military assistance now."

While the House Democratic leadership has not shown open opposition to the idea, it has not expressed much enthusiasm either. Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., the House Speaker, has decided "to stay in the background on this, for now," although he personally opposes renewed military aid, an assistant said today.

An aide to Representative Dave McCurdy, the Oklahoma Democrat who was instrumental in devising the compromise that resulted in the nonlethal aid package a year ago, said Mr. McCurdy "wants to be assured that the United States has exhausted all diplomatic means" before turning to "lethal assistance as a last resort."

He said Mr. McCurdy believes the Administration has not pursued available diplomatic alternatives, including meeting with the foreign ministers on Monday.

The foreign ministers from Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Peru had asked that the United States end its aid to the rebels in exchange for an agreement from the Sandinistas that they would liberalize their policies.

Mr. Shultz rejected the idea, officials said, restating the American position that the Sandinistas must agree to negotiate with the rebels, an idea the Nicaraguan Government has unequivocally rejected.